

GBINFO



COLLINGS I-35

PRICE: £3,799

BUILT IN: USA

SCALE LENGTH: 632 mm
(24.9 inches)NUT WIDTH: 43mm
(1.69 inches)STRING SPACING AT NUT:
36mm (1.4 inches)BODY: Carved flamed
maple top, semi-hollow
mahogany body

NECK: Mahogany, set

FINGERBOARD: East Indian
rosewood, 305mm radius
(12 inches)

FRETS: 22 medium

PICKUPS: 2 x Jason Lollar
custom humbuckersCONTROLS: 2 x volume,
2 x tone, 3-way selectorBRIDGE: TonePros
Tune-o-matic-style bridge
& stopbar tailpieceSTRING SPACING AT
BRIDGE: 52mm (2 inches)MACHINEHEADS: Sperzel
vintage tuners with
ivoroid buttonsFINISHES: Tobacco
sunburst (shown),
natural blonde, crimson,
jet black, custom finishes
available; high-gloss
nitro-cellulose lacquer

WEIGHT: 2.94kg (6.5lbs)

CASE: Deluxe TKL hard
shell case includedLEFT-HANDERS: Yes
(add £247)OPTIONS: I-35 Deluxe with
bound neck & headstock,
Brazilian rosewood
fingerboard & headstock
vener, ivoroid control
knobs & pickup surrounds
(£4,619); further options
include gold hardware,
quilted maple top, black/
white purfling &
parallelogram fingerboard
inlays (charges apply)

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SEMI HEAVEN

UNDERSTATED ELEGANCE, TOP-NOTCH TIMBERS AND METICULOUS CRAFTSMANSHIP – CAN THE COLLINGS I-35 REALLY SOUND AS GOOD AS IT LOOKS? **PAUL ALCANTARA** FINDS OUT

Like the Gibson Les Paul and Fender Stratocaster, the Gibson ES-335 is rightly regarded as a design classic, and as such has inspired numerous imitations. While many of these unashamedly copy Gibson's original down to the last nut and bolt, others have taken the semi-solid concept as a starting point from which to build a guitar of their own. Fender, Guild, Hamer, Heritage and PRS are just a few of the companies that have produced instruments that in one way or another owe a debt to Gibson's seminal design.

With the ES-335, Gibson's objective was to combine the sustain and resistance to feedback of a solidbody with the warmer tonality and familiar appearance of an archtop hollowbody electric. This was achieved by installing a solid block of maple inside the guitar's thinline body, in effect moving it a step or two closer to the company's solidbody Les Paul model. With the I-35, Collings has taken this process a stage further.

BODY & NECK

In truth, the Collings I-35 is as notable for its differences from the Gibson ES-335 as for its similarities. While the

body of the Gibson is constructed from pressed maple laminate, the Collings is made from solid wood throughout. The back part of its body comprises a slab of mahogany that has been routed from the front so as to leave a solid central section to which the pickups, bridge and tailpiece are mounted. Hollow 'chambers' at either side of the body are visible through the f-holes. The top of the guitar is carved from two centre-joined sections of solid maple that, on our review instrument, display a boldly flamed figure. The top and back are bound in a single layer of grained ivoroid.

Though not immediately apparent, the I-35 is significantly smaller than an ES-335, measuring approximately three quarters of an inch less across its upper bout, an inch less across its lower bout and an inch and a half less from butt end to neck heel.

Neck and body meet at the 19th fret, the ivoroid binding extending around the region where the back section of the body overlaps the neck heel – a neat touch. The body's reduced dimensions mean that the cutaway area is somewhat narrower than that of an ES-335, and as a result, access to the upper frets feels a little more restricted (though still better than that afforded by a Les Paul). →

LOLLAR ON LOLLAR

US PICKUP MAESTRO SPILLS THE BEANS

■ Collings tested pickups from several makers before settling on these humbuckers from the workshop of Jason Lollar.

"Bill [Collings, head honcho of Collings Guitars] found that my pickups had better clarity and articulation and a tone that suited his guitars," Lollar explains. Equally as important from Collings' perspective was consistent performance from batch to batch. "They checked that by ordering the initial samples and then coming back a few months later and ordering again," Jason recalls. "That's way beyond what most people do. For the I-35, Collings chose pickups that are patterned after samples of PAFs found in dot-neck 335s from the late 1950s to early 1960s. Output is lower, with a tight articulated bass and a bit of zing on the initial attack. They are also brighter and airier with less

mid-range than a higher-output humbucker. In addition, they are un-potted – just like original Gibson PAF pickups.

"During the summer NAMM show in Austin, we got to hear all the guitars at a party that Collings held at the famous Continental Club on South Congress Avenue," says Lollar. "Listening to a guitar in a club gives a very different perspective from listening to it in your living room or workshop. After this session, we decided that the bridge pickup should be tweaked to bring out more mid-range output and some creamier sweetness in the treble frequencies. It's been really great to work with Collings. It's a first-class company that's always prepared to go the extra mile." For more information, see www.lollarguitars.com.



PRS-style body sculpting might have gone some way to solving this problem but Collings has chosen – wisely in our opinion – to maintain the guitar's traditional appearance. The guitar is finished in nitro-cellulose lacquer, the top sporting a beautifully executed tobacco sunburst.

The one-piece mahogany glued-in neck feels reassuringly solid, with enough meat to the C-shaped profile to provide comfy left-hand support, but stopping well short of the clubby profile found on some vintage reissues. It's topped by an unbound East Indian rosewood fingerboard (the more lavish I-35 Deluxe has a Brazilian rosewood fingerboard) inlaid with simple mother-of-pearl dot position markers. The shaping of the smoothly polished bone nut and 22 medium-sized frets is, needless to say, exemplary.



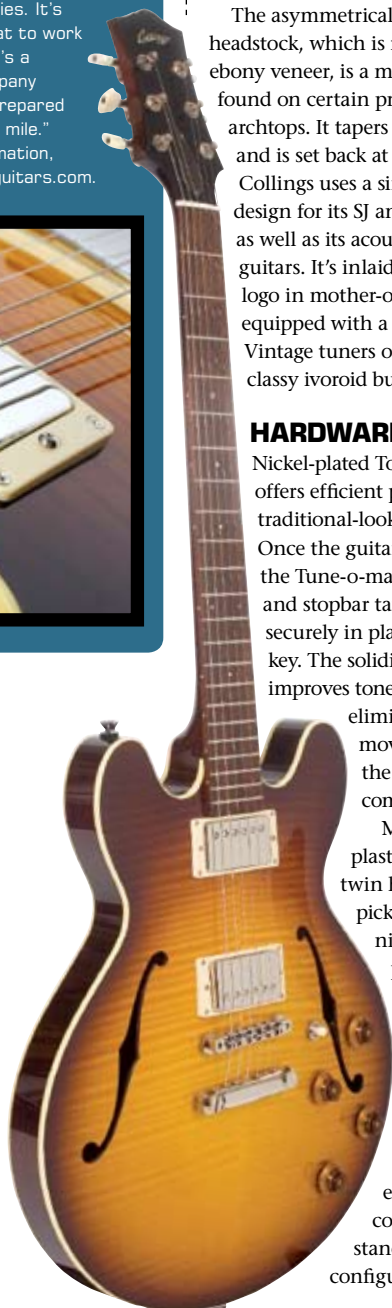
■ The ivoroid binding continues around the neck heel – gorgeous!

The asymmetrical unbound headstock, which is fronted with an ebony veneer, is a mirror image of that found on certain pre-war Epiphone archtops. It tapers along its length and is set back at a 15-degree angle. Collings uses a similar headstock design for its SJ and C series flattops as well as its acoustic archtop guitars. It's inlaid with the Collings logo in mother-of-pearl and equipped with a set of Sperzel Vintage tuners outfitted with classy ivoroid buttons.

HARDWARE & PARTS

Nickel-plated TonePros hardware offers efficient performance in a traditional-looking package. Once the guitar has been set up, the Tune-o-matic-style bridge and stopbar tailpiece are locked securely in place with an Allen key. The solidity of this system improves tone and sustain by eliminating small movements between the various components involved.

Mounted in cream plastic surrounds, the twin humbucking pickups are fitted with nickel covers. These pickups are custom wound for Collings by US boutique pickup guru, Jason Lollar (see box, above left). The electronics comprise the standard Gibson configuration of



LUCKY YOU!

PUTTING THE I-35'S PRICE IN CONTEXT

■ Guitarists are always complaining about the financial investment required to get their grubby hands on a top-quality instrument.

To put this in perspective, we investigated the cost of pro-quality instruments in other areas. First off we spoke to Frances Gillham of violin dealer, J. & A. Beare Ltd (over the years Beare's clients have included Jacqueline du Pré, Yo-Yo Ma, Pinchas Zukerman, Vanessa-Mae, Nigel Kennedy and Yehudi Menuhin). Frances explained that a violinist playing in one of the country's top orchestras would need to spend between £12,000 and £15,000 in order to acquire an instrument of suitable quality. This would buy them a new violin. If they preferred a vintage fiddle, however, prices would start at around £300,000! These instruments, she emphasised, would not be appropriate for a soloist, who must expect to pay considerably more. Moving to the area of brass instruments, you're looking at £2,000 for a trumpet or trombone (add another £1,000 for a bespoke instrument), £5,500 to £8,500 for a French horn and £5,500 to £9,000 for a tuba. And pianos? A Yamaha full-sized grand piano costs between £20,000 and £30,000, while a Steinway Concert Grand will set you back a cool £95,550. Still think guitars are expensive?

individual tone and volume controls for each pickup, plus a three-way selector switch that is positioned just below the bridge.

SOUNDS

Though the I-35's scale length is marginally longer than that used by Gibson (631.82mm as opposed to

DETAILS

QUITE SIMPLY A FAULTLESS GUITAR IN TERMS OF LOOKS, SOUNDS AND BUILD



■ The high-quality Sperzels with ivoryoid buttons look good and work smoothly



■ Volume and tone pots for each pickup plus a three-way selector make up the controls



■ The unbound Indian rosewood fingerboard features simple mother-of-pearl dot inlays



GBOPINION

COLLINGS I-35

GOLD STARS

- ★ No-compromise build quality
- ★ High-quality parts & materials
- ★ Tone to die for

BLACK MARKS

- None

IDEAL FOR...

Blues, jazz, fusion, indie, country – anything short of pedal-to-the-floor metal

628.65mm), the overall feel and string tension is more or less the same. The guitar arrived factory-fitted with a set of 11–49 gauge strings. This may appear heavy if you're accustomed to 9s, but with a little practice, string bending presents no problem, and the benefits in terms of tuning stability and tone are well worth the extra effort involved.

Played acoustically, the I-35 produces a sound somewhere between that of an ES-335 and a Les Paul. There's more acoustic volume than you'd expect from a solidbody, but with a solid guitar's smooth sustain and even response. The review guitar weighs in at a tad under 3kg (6.5lbs), which comprehensively refutes the argument that you need a heavy guitar for lots of sustain.

Plugged in, the Lollar pickups complement the instrument's primary voice perfectly, with a sound that is clear, focussed and articulate. The use of a traditional 22-fret fingerboard means that the pickups are correctly placed to produce the tones associated with the best vintage Gibson-style guitars. And what tones they are!

Though warm and full-bodied, the

neck pickup avoids any tendency to bottom-end muddiness, with a sweet, chiming top end. The bridge unit, meanwhile, is bright, open and bell-like in tone. The I-35 takes overdrive in its stride too, handling everything from smooth, Larry Carlton-approved sustain through dark Cream-era 'woman tone' to Robben Ford bluesy grit with aplomb.

The guitar is ultra-responsive to the player's touch, so tone colour and dynamics are shaped as much by finger pressure as by pickup selection and knob twiddling. It's simply a joy to play, and whatever you throw at it – from jazz chording to blues licks to full-on rock riffing – the I-35 sounds simply exceptional.

■ Collings Guitars are distributed by Guitar XS – www.guitarxs.com

GBCONCLUSION

THIS IS AS GOOD AS IT GETS

■ To regard the Collings I-35 as a Gibson ES-335 copy is a bit like dismissing a vintage D'Angelico New Yorker as a Gibson Super-400 rip-off. Yes, John D'Angelico based the New Yorker on Gibson's flagship archtop, but some would argue that he surpassed the original.

The outline is similar, the pickups explicitly emulate Gibson's fabled PAFs and the controls are classic Gibson, but the I-35 is far from a clone. With its solid wood construction, carved maple top and easy-to-handle downsized body, the I-35 is a very different animal from its fabled progenitor, though if you love Gibson's ES-335 (as we do) you are sure to love the I-35 too. It's a fabulous instrument that plays and sounds every bit as good as it looks. In short, this is as good as an electric guitar gets. Period. **GB**

GBRATINGS

COLLINGS I-35

BODY & NECK	★★★★
HARDWARE & PARTS	★★★★
PLAYABILITY	★★★★
SOUNDS	★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★
GBVERDICT	★★★★